DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 221 059 FL 013 205

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TITLE	How to Tell When Someone is Saying "No" Revisited. Professional Papers.
INSTITUTION	National Center for Bilingual Research, Los Alamitos, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Jun 81
NOTE	17p.; Performed pursuant to cooperative agreement 00-CA-80-0001. Revision of paper which appeared in "Topics in Culture Learning" August 1976.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Communicative Competence (Languages); Comprehension; *Cultural Awareness; *Language Usage; Language Variation; *Negative Forms (Language); Second Language Learning; Social Values; Sociocultural Patterns; Sociolinguistics; *Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS	*Speech Acts

ABSTRACT

There is a great deal of knowledge required to send or receive a message of "no." The acquisition of communicative competence, i.e., the ability to interpret the full meaning of a message and the ability to properly formulate such messages, requires three levels of knowledge. These three levels are all needed in the interpretation of the message of negation. First of all, a person from another culture must find the appropriate form function relationship. Next, one needs to learn which social parameters enter into the speech act. Finally, it is essential to get a group on the underlying values of the society. Examples of ways of saying no across several cultures are given. The examples illustrate that confusion can easily arise when both participants in the speech act do not possess communicative competence at all three levels. (EKN)

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Joan Rubin

June, 1981

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HOW TO TELL WHEN SOMEONE IS SAYING "NO" REVISITED*

Joan Rubin

One of the more important communicative tasks that confronts a traveler is the recognition of when a speaker has said 'no.' That is, one needs to be able to recognize that a respondent has refused or denied that which the speaker has demanded, solicited or offered. Equally, one needs to acquire the appropriate manner in which to respond in the negative when offered, solicited or demanded something. Granted that it is sometimes difficult to recognize a refusal in one's mother tongue where the answer might be ambiguous or deliverately obscure, nonetheless, in many encounters the meaning is clear if one knows how to read or interpret the appropriate signals.

A first task for the visitor abroad is to discover which forms are used to fulfill this function. If we compare form and function across cultures, it soon becomes clear that one form may be used to mean different things in another culture than in one's own. For example, in Turkish 'no' is signaled by moving one's head backwards while rolling one's eyes upwards. However, to an American this movement is close to the signal used for saying 'yes.' Further, in still other cultures, head shaking may have nothing to do with affirmation or negation. In parts of India, rolling

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*This is a revised paper of the same article which appeared in Topics in Culture Learning, August, 1976. I am indebted to a number of people for the examples found herein. I especially want to thank Steven Boggs, Greg Trifonovitch and David Wu for their helpful examples. Thanks too to Jerry Boucher and Merle Stetser for their comments on the earlier version of this paper.

Forthcoming: TESOL and Sociolinguistic Research edited by Nessa Wolfson and Elliot Judd.

the head slowly from side to side means something like 'yes, go on, I'm listening.' Thus, as one goes from culture to culture form and function may not match. If a foreigner wants to communicate appropriately, he/she must develop the competence of sending and receiving "no" messages.

In order to understand the meaning of a new set of forms, it takes more than learning the forms that are used for denial or negation. A foreigner must also learn when and to whom he/she must use the proper form. That is to say, one must learn when and to whom it is appropriate to use a particular form which means 'no.' For example, how does an employee refuse a request from his/her employer? This may well be different from saying 'no' to a peer. It will be important as well to understand what the appropriate conditions for saying 'no' are. A speaker may be insulting the foreigner deliberately by the form of 'no' he uses. These conditions must be learned along with the form for 'no' or important messages may be missed.

However, not only the appropriate form and setting must be learned but also the underlying values of a culture will alter an interpretation of what is meant by a particular form even if used in the right setting. We will find that deep-seated cultural values will affect the proper interpretation of a particular form. Without knowledge of the central values, the traveler may never understand properly what message the speaker is really trying to convey. Each of us carries around certain central values which underlie our behavior. These might be values such as being hospitable, being respectful, 'time is mone,' humans as mechanistic beings and the like.

Finally, individuals tend to have idiosyncratic ways of sending and receiving 'no.' One of my students wrote a paper once on how she knew

what was the most auspicious time to ask her father for something so as to avoid his saying no and thus more easily gain the favor she was asking for.

We can all recount tales of misunderstanding while residing in a foreign culture. Here are a couple of my own: (1) While living abroad I invited people to parties or dinner at my house. Although I requested an RSVP I never got any. As a result, it was necessary to prepare a large amount of food in case they all came. I was annoyed that I hadn't understood the cues for negation. (2) On several occasions, I found that I couldn't interpret the servants' ways of saying no. (3) In the United States negotiations with North Vietnam were often misinterpreted. The President often said: "I'll talk peace anywhere, anytime." I think that one meaning which can be attributed to this sentence is 'no I won't.' The reason for this interpretation is that in most U.S. areas, when a person says 'drop in any time' this is not an invitation. Rather, if one really wanted to extend an invitation one would need to specify when and where to meet. By saying 'anywhere, anytime' without being more specific, the President's willingness to negotiate seemed dubious. (For a fuller discussion of the American approach to invitations, see: Wolfson, 1979.)

This paper will provide evidence for one of the claims of the field of sociolinguistics which is concerned with understanding the speech act by looking at speech variation and social structure and rules. The claim is made that the interpretation of the speech act requires understanding it as a totality. Further, it is claimed that it won't do to merely look at the form-function relation inherent in any speech act in order to be

able to interpret the message for use of a particular form. One must also look for the underlying values inherent in the speech act. All of this kind of knowledge comprises what is meant by the term "communicative competence," i.e., the ability to interpret the full meaning of a message and the ability to properly formulate such messages.

Looked at in this deeper way, the teaching of language would greatly benefit by providing the student with this kind of information about the culture and the proper use of the language. Language teaching often stops short in describing form-function relationships. At best, it gives clues as to the social parameters involved. Only rarely are students given information about the underlying values of a speech act. Part of the reason this is not taught is because teaching materials are not organized in this manner and because the details of a value system are more difficult to discern than either form-function relations or the social parameters of the speech act. However, if students are to use a language effectively, it is essential that we provide them with this sort of information.

This paper will exemplify what the three levels of understanding a speech act look like for one kind of speech act, namely, negation. It will illustrate how all three are needed in the interpretation of the message of negation.

FORM-FUNCTION RELATIONS

It's not hard to find examples of similar ways of expressing 'no' relations across several cultures. These are worth listing:

(1) Be silent, hesitate, show a lack of enthusiasm. In many cultures in the world, being silent is a way of refusing an offer, an invitation or of giving an answer.

--When asked whether you liked a movie or a dress, be silent.

--If you receive a written invitation, don't answer.

The big problem for a foreigner is that silence may mean many other things. Among the Western Apache, as Basso (1972) has shown, silence is used in "social situations in which participants perceive their relationship vis a vis one another to be ambiguous and/or unpredictable." Basso argues that "silence is defined as appropriate with respect to a specific individual or individuals."

(2) Offer an alternative. In some cases in order not to offend or to direct the conversation away from the request, the addressee may divert attention by suggesting an alternative.

- How do you like this book?
  It's good but I prefer--
- What time should we meet? Around 5?
  How about 4:30?
  Let's make it 5.
- Mary can you help with the cooking?
  Susan can do it better

(3) Postponement (delaying answers). Often in response to a request to perform something or to an invitation, 'no' is indicated by postponement.

- Can you come over this evening?
  Not today, next time, I'll let you know.
- I think it's a great idea but I don't have time at the moment.
- Say 'yes' late (i.e., let the host know so late, it's impossible for them to act).
- We're very busy now but we'll get someone on it as soon as possible.
- We'll take the matter under advisement.

- Sylvia, can you do this?
  Mañana (note that this is translated as tomorrow but it's real meaning in this situation is a subtle negation).

- We aren't ready for your service yet.

(4) Put the blame on a third party or something over which you have no control.

- My husband doesn't want me to or I'll have to ask my husband.

- We'll put it up to the committee but I can't promise anything.

- I can't drink because I have a bad liver.

- My budget doesn't permit me to go.

- It's too expensive

- Tell Arthur Murray dance studio salespersons while talking on the telephone: "I'm sorry I only have one leg" (even when the speaker has two legs but wants to avoid a sales pitch).

(5) Avoidance. One way to answer a question or an offer is to avoid responding directly.

- If a boy comes to visit a girl, don't be at home to him.

- If offered food you don't like, say "I like X more."

- How do you like my dress?
  It's interesting (i.e., the addressee doesn't like it; interesting is a nondescript word with no real meaning here).

(6) General acceptance of an offer but giving no details.

- In the United States, 'drop in any time' is generally not taken as an invitation.

- In Arabic speaking countries, the following is a negation:
  Let's have a picnic next Saturday?
  Imshaallah (God willing), (equivalent to 'no').
  But Imshaalah plus time and details (equivalent to 'yes').
- In Taiwan: I'll come but . . . (equal to 'no).

(7) Divert and distract the addressee.

- In Hawaiian culture when a leader at a meeting begins to be too bossy, he may find two kinds of refusal of his orders:

  --silence and a lack of enthusiasm (a hostile response)

  --playful questions and misbehavior (breaks up tension)

- In the U.S., diverting a question is done by questioning the question.

- How old are you?
  Why do you ask? How old do you think? (Weiser, 1976).

- Address the speech act but not the content.

  --Please close the door.

  --Why?

(8) General acceptance with excuses.

- It's a good idea but . . .

(9) Say what's offered is inappropriate.

- It's not quite suitable.

- It isn't good management practice.

- It's ahead of its time.

Many of the above mentioned nine approaches to saying 'no' are found in every culture. A foreigner has trouble when the relation between form and meaning are not the same in two different cultures. For example:

(1) Silence may mean 'no' in one culture but 'maybe' in another. In the U.S. if you don't receive an answer to an inquiry, it means 'no.' However, in Britain it means 'maybe' or 'I'll write later when I have something to say.' Among the Western Apache, silence is used when meeting strangers, during the initial stages of courting, when children come home, when being cussed out, and when one is with people who are sad, Basso (1972) notes that "keeping silent among the Western Apache is a response to uncertainty and unpredictability in social relations" (p. 83).

(2) Verbal cues may give one message but nonverbal cues another. An example is that of a Toradjan in Indonesia who worked as a laborer in a school headed by a British principal. The laborer always said 'yes' but let her know by his body position that he didn't intend to do it.

(3) Societies differ in how food is offered and accepted and rejected:

- In the U.S., a hostess will offer more food usually only once.

  --Have some more.

  --No, thanks I'm really full.

  --O.K.

- In parts of the Arab world and many other parts of the world one mustn't accept food the first or second time it is offered however, refusal the third time is definitive.

Host	Guest
--Have some	--I'm full.
--I know you're full but have some more for X's sake.	--As much as I like X, I do have to refuse.
--For my sake, have some. I cooked the food.	--For your sake, I'll take some, (may then leave it on the plate).

An anecdote was recounted by an Arab speaker's first encounter with some Americans. On his first visit to an American home, he was served some delicious sandwiches. When the hostess came to offer seconds, he refused. Much to his chagrin, the hostess didn't repeat the offer. Thus, the Arab sat there, confronted by some lovely sandwiches which he couldn't eat.

(4) In France, when offered something, the best refusal is 'merci.' The translation of this word is 'thanks' but it means 'no, thanks.' In the U.S. 'thanks' means 'yes, thanks.'

(5) Jakobson (1972) showed that head movements for 'yes' and 'no differ from culture to culture.

(6) Saying 'no' is also related to the variety of language used by the respondent:

> In some Arab groups, when you are invited to a feast; if the addressee responds in colloquial Arabic and says 'yes, sure I'll come,' the speaker knows that the person will come. However, if the speaker responds using some classical Arabic, his/her response means 'no.'

(7) In Japan and Korea, a question is more polite when phrased negatively:

- "Wouldn't you like some more tea." An American would normally respond: 'Yes' meaning: Yes, I would like some more tea, but a Japanese or Korean would say: 'No' meaning: It is not the case that I would not like more tea.

One of the more interesting observations about 'no' is that sometimes 'no' may mean 'maybe' given the right time and circumstances. This is a quite important function in boy-girl relations and in politics. An example of this function is shown by the following sex-biased joke:

What's the difference between a lady and a diplomat?

When a diplomat says 'yes,' he means 'maybe.'
When a diplomat says 'maybe,' he means 'no.'
When a diplomat says 'no,' he's not a diplomat.

When a lady says 'no,' she means 'maybe.'
When a lady says 'maybe,' she means 'yes.'
When a lady says 'yes,' she's no lady!!!

It becomes important to know when a 'no' is negotiable. Members in their own society, need to know when a 'no' is negotiable. Children, employees and diplomats most often need to learn this quickly.

SOCIAL PARAMETERS OF SAYING 'NO'

All of these examples lead us to be careful not to assume that similar forms have the same function cross-culturally. We also know that we shouldn't assume that the task is one of merely finding the proper form to express a function. The form-function relationship is just the tip of the iceberg. We also need to consider how the performance of the speech act is related to social structure (that is, how you should address superiors, equals, respected persons and how this relates to your own status). In some cultures, children can be more direct than in others. In addition, we need to consider how the speech act is related to a whole set of values attached to these behaviors.

Some of the social features that can be spelled out are as follows. In many societies, it is more important how you say 'no' than the answer itself. It is more important to maintain proper social relations than to be definitive.

Some examples which are related to social structure features are listed below:

- In Korea, when old men offer younger men food, the younger one may not refuse.
- In the Marshall Islands, one is not permitted to say 'no' to a chief's son.
- In Poland, the older a person is, the harder it is to refuse.
- In Taiwan, the closer a relative is, the easier is to say 'no.'

In many societies a higher value is placed on maintaining social relations than in getting an answer. For example, in the Philippines, one tries to avoid the embarrasing situation where someone can say 'no' directly to you. Instead you send out 'feelers.' For example, if you

want to be invited to a party, you might say to a person whom you know is giving a party: I hear that you are a good cook/have a nice place. The addressee may refuse by saying: "It's only for extended family." Or, if you want to get a job for some relative you may send out a feeler (so as not to be faced with a refusal). An example of this kind of transaction is:

- By the way, I hear you have a job to fill. I have a nephew who is hard-working and who lives not too far away.
  If yes, discuss his merits for the job.
  If no, shift responsibility to a third party by saying, "There's a committee deciding it."

- If employees want raises in salaries, they may send out a feeler by telling a sob story, telling how much in need of money they are.
  Boss can refuse by saying how bad sales are going or how tight the budget is this year.

In Taiwan, where there seems to be a similar effort to maintain social relations and to avoid embarrassing situations, to get a job one would go through an intermediary. Likewise, to find a marriage partner, Taiwanese would go through a broker. The broker (usually a friend), would arrange a gathering of the three sides by going to a show or preparing a meal. The girl can indicate her interest or lack thereof by whether she will sit by the boy or not.

In the Arab world, it is common to use a go-between to get a job, arrange a marriage, or get into a private school so that a direct refusal is prevented. However, unlike the Philippines, in arranging a job for a relative, one may tell the employer that there is a candidate who is worthless but who will shine under the tutelage of the employer.

On occasion in maintaining good social relations, one may not say no, yet if one cannot fully comply, one should do something to indicate good will. For example, in Taiwan and the Trust Territory, invitees to

a party, funeral or wedding must show they are a part of the community by attending. However, if this is impossible, they should either show up, if only for a few minutes, or send a representative, friend or child.

In some cases, social relations may be such that people only understand the interchange if they know both the question and the answer. For example, in Taiwan if food is offered and the guest refuses, and if food is not offered again, he/she may feel that the host/hostess is stingy. The whole speech act consists of a series of questions and answers. In India, if people are offered food once and refuse, and if no second offer is made, they may recognize that the first offer was just a formality. In Indonesia, if people ask a wrong question (i.e., one that shouldn't be asked), then they may get a strange answer. For example, if a girl is asked by her sister-in-law whether she has a boyfriend, she will deny it because she is embarrased to admit having one.

Recognizing a 'no' not only depends on finding the proper form-function relationship, it depends as well on the setting and social structure which dictates how and when 'no' may be said. Interpretation of a negative is also related to underlying values in a society. In many cases, the problem is not one of truth and forthrightness; rather it is one of how people like to be treated and talked to.

VALUES

In addition to knowing the form-function relatin and the social constraints on how to say 'no' these are some basic values of how to behave in a society. That is, basic to any social communication are the underlying values which participants in a communicative act hold. It is

important to have an understanding of how a society approaches social interaction in order to properly send and interpret messages. Given this understanding, we can predict where communication can break down when the goals of two individuals belonging to different value systems come into conflict.

In many cultures, saving one's own and/or another's face is high on the list of values in social interaction. This seems less important in American and European cultures. Here are a couple of examples where these values come into conflict and result in misinterpretation and judgments regarding the interlocutor.

1. Richard Applegate, 1975, notes that Americans are very concerned with getting exact information about such matters as times, places, routes and so on. Hence, when an American is asked for directions he/she tries to share this information or if uncertain, he/she will admit to this and then venture a guess. In other cultures the focus may not be on the passing of accurate information but rather on maintaining social relations. For example, in Vietnam, if someone a few steps higher asks for information from a peasant, such as: "Is this the way to the station?" the usual response is <u>do phai</u> "That must be." The reason for this response which may not be at all acceptable is that the peasant wants to avoid contradicting a superior person or doesn't wish to make him/her appear ignorant. If the American assumes the accuracy of the response he/she may very well be led astray and may become angry and frustrated. For the American, the Vietnamese response seems evasive and the individual judged as irresponsible or even deceitful. Certainly, given the American emphasis on 'time is money' the peasant has caused the American considerable loss. On the other hand, the Vietnamese may be puzzled by the American's anger. The Vietnamese peasant feels comfortable because he/she has provided a socially responsible answer. If the American wanted to find out information, he/she as a superior should seek out an intermediary so that the addressee needn't put or be put in an embarrassing situation.

2. Elinor Ochs Keenan, 1976, offers a different example of how knowing cultural values is essential is sending and interpreting messages. She reports that in Madagascar, in a small village which speaks Malagasy, <u>new</u> information is considered a rare commodity. Hence, when a speaker asks for information about some future event such as: "When is the turning of ancestral bones to take place?" the response will not be very precise.

> It will be something like: "I'm not certain" or "In a bit" or "Around September." The reason for this imprecision is that the speaker does not wish to commit themselves publicly to a precise date until certain the event will take place. Otherwise, he/she will be guilty of premature or faulty judgment. Natives of this village understand this response as being related to the value of saving one's own face. Americans would more likely judge the response as uncooperative or unfriendly.

The problem is that a speaker may know the form-function relation and use it correctly but underlying values may require a different kind of answer.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a great deal of knowledge required to send or receive a message of 'no.' The acquisition of communicative competence requires all three levels of knowledge. First of all, a person from another culture must find the appropriate form-function relation. Next, one needs to learn which social parameters enter into the speech act. Finally, it is essential to get a grasp on the underlying values in a society.

Saying 'no' is not simply finding the proper form-function relation. Rather, that is only the tip of the iceberg and a visitor to an unfamiliar country needs to probe more deeply if (s)he is to express himself adequately and if (s)he is to interpret messages sent by a native.

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